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ABSTRACT

A research study assessed the amount of front page newspaper coverage allotted to "character/competence/image" issues versus "platform/political" issues in the 1992 presidential campaign. Using textual analysis, methodology of content analysis, researchers coded the front page of the following 5 newspapers between August 1 and November 3, 1992: "The New York Times," "Chicago Tribune," "Los Angeles Times," "Milwaukee Journal," and "Minneapolis Star Tribune." Coverage of President George Bush, Vice-President Dan Quayle, Bill Clinton, and Al Gore was coded. Content analysis of the articles used headline word cues to determine article eligibility; standardized coding sheets were designed and used for category classification. Descriptive statistics were performed to analyze the data. Results indicated that of the 55 articles coded by the researchers, "character/competence/image" issues accounted for either a majority or a plurality of front page coverage for 4 of the 5 newspapers during the period. Analysis of the summarized data also revealed that all 5 papers featured more coverage of "character/competence/image" issues than "platform/political" issues during the final month and days before the election. By providing an understanding of the types of issues that compromised the agenda set by the media, and by presenting evidence that suggests a strong historical trend of such issue coverage, in scholarly studies researchers can continue to explore the links between issue coverage, the process of opinion formation, and democratic decision-making in society. (Contains 43 references, 3 tables of data, and 5 notes.) (TB)

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ED 385 883

Newspaper Coverage of the 1992 Presidential Campaign:

A Content Analysis of Character/Competence/Image Issues

Versus Platform/Political Issues

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Running Head: CHARACTER VERSUS PLATFORM COVERAGE

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Abstract

The purpose of this research study was to assess the amount of front page newspaper coverage alloted to "character/competence/image" issues versus "platform/political" issues in the 1992 presidential campaign. Using the textual analysis methodology of content analysis, researchers coded the front page of the following five newspapers between August 1 and November 3, 1992: The New York Times, Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, Milwaukee Journal, and Minneapolis Star Tribune. Researchers coded coverage of President George Bush, Vice-President Dan Quayle, Governor Bill Clinton, and Senator Al Gore. A content analysis of the articles was conducted using headline word cues to determine article eligibility; standardized coding sheets were designed and used for category classification. Descriptive statistics were performed to analyze the data. Results of the study indicated that of the 555 articles coded by the researchers, "character/competence/image" issues accounted for either a majority or a plurality of front page coverage for four of the five newspapers during the coding period. Analysis of the summarized data also revealed that all five newspapers featured more coverage of "character/competence/image" issues than "platform/political" issues during the final month and days before the election.

Newspaper Coverage of the 1992 Presidential Campaign:

A Content Analysis of Character/Competence/Image Issues

Versus Platform/Political Issues

According to Parenti (1993), "For many people an issue does not exist until it appears in the news media. Indeed, what we even define as an issue or event, what we see and hear, and what we do *not* see and hear are greatly determined by those who control the communications world" (p. 1). In the coverage of a presidential campaign, for example, the issues that are determined as important by those who control the media influence what the voter perceives as significant about the candidates. As Parenti (1993) makes clear, the press mold opinion visibility, "[the press]...set the issue agenda for the rest of us, choosing what to emphasize and what to ignore or suppress, in effect, organizing much of our political world for us" (p. 23). Whether the electorate's political world is organized with thoughts of issues of "character/competence/image" versus issues of a "platform/political" nature is significant. Cohen's (1963) now famous summation of agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) illuminates this point: the media may not always tell us what to think, but they are strikingly successful at telling us what to think about.

The purpose of this study is to assess the amount of front page newspaper coverage allotted to "character/competence/image" issues versus "platform/political" issues in the 1992 presidential campaign. This study is significant as it is timely, and it contributes to the existing literature concerning the nature of issue coverage by the media in presidential campaigns. A review of the literature makes clear that, in the past, the media have not provided voters with adequate coverage of substantive platform/political issues; instead, the media have tended to focus, for example, on issues which have developed from the campaign and issues related to the candidates' character (e.g., Sigelman & Bullock, 1991; Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981; Patterson, 1980; Arterton, 1978). Thus, this study continues the examination of issue coverage by the media to understand how, if at all,

such coverage has changed in the 1992 presidential campaign in terms of its issue focus: character/competence/image versus platform/political.

This study will explore the nature of this topic by first reviewing the prior research and literature relevant to coverage of "platform/political" issues and second, by providing an understanding of the literature related to "character/competence/image" issues. Following this review, two research questions will be posited.

Coverage of Platform/Political Issues

Platform/Political. Platform/political issues are defined as the substantive issues of the campaign, for example, platform topics chosen by the respective candidates and/or coverage of the candidate's position on past, current or future policy issues. Past studies of media coverage of presidential campaigns have concluded that press coverage has tended to focus on aspects of "hoopla" and "horse race," such as "winners and losers," campaign strategy, poll results, and campaign appearances rather than on the substance of the campaign (Sigelman & Bullock, 1991; Robinson & Sheehan, 1983; Patterson, 1980; Arterton, 1978). These findings are further supported by Patterson and Davis (1985), who in their study of the 1984 campaign preprimary period, found that the candidate's own issue priorities, as measured by their campaign speeches, were included in less than one-tenth of the articles specifically about those candidates.

Coverage of "hoopla" and "horse race" displaces reporting of substantive platform/political policy issues. According to a study of network coverage of the 1988 primaries conducted by Lichter, Amundson, and Noyes (1989), news media discussion of issues developed from campaign incidents far outweighed discussion of policy issues; futhermore, the fall general election campaign was not substantially more policy-oriented than the primary season. Patterson (1989) found a similar emphasis with newsmagazines covering the 1988 presidential campaign; less than twenty percent of news about the campaign was devoted to coverage of platform/political policy issues.

As Davis (1992), makes clear, even when platform/political issues are covered, they may not be the issues which are stressed by the candidates. According to a study conducted by Seymour-Ure (1974), the press tend to favor platform/political issues which can be expressed simply, involve high emotion and conflict, and which are clear-cut or neatly divide the candidates. Davis (1992) suggests that journalists gravitate to issues developed from campaign incidents rather than platform/political issues because they more neatly fit news values. Platform/political issues are not dramatic nor unexpected, and they require some familiarity with the issues. Issues developed from campaign incidents are new, unpredictable, and usually less complex.

Coverage of Character/Competence/Image Issues

Character. Past agenda-setting research studies focusing on political elections reveal that newspapers have tended to print more stories about a candidate's character than how he or she stands on platform/political issues (MacDougall, 1980; Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981). For example, MacDougall reported that studies of the 1968, 1972, and 1976 campaigns revealed that newspapers devoted respectively 56%, 64%, and 61% of their presidential coverage to the "character and personal attributes" of candidates.

During the 1992 presidential campaign, there was much discussion concerning the amount of time that the media spent covering the "character" of the candidates (Alter, 1992). Indeed, as reported by Iggers (1992, October 25), "character...emerged as one of the most important and least understood issues of the 1992 presidential campaign. President Bush...made character the centerpiece of his campaign, hammering at the theme that Bill Clinton [could not] be trusted, and the Clinton camp...counter attacked by accusing Bush of smear tactics" (p. 1). Discussion of the character issue was so pervasive, in fact, that the following comment prefaced a question in the second televised presidential debate: "The amount of time the candidates have spent on this campaign trashing their opponent's character and their programs is depressingly large. Why can't your discussion and

proposals reflect the genuine complexity and the difficulty of the issues to try to build a consensus around the best aspects of all proposals?" (1992, October 17, p. 10Y).

Sheehy (1988) defined "character" as the perceived combination of those traits--together with the values he or she represents--that set a person apart, and motivate his or her behavior. Is character a bogus issue, a distraction from the substantive issues, such as the candidate's position on the economy, social policy, and foreign affairs? Or is character the most important issue of the campaign? Why do the media tend to emphasize character and why do voters seek out such information?

According to Davis (1992), more emphasis is placed on presidential character today than in the past; "the greater demands of the office both domestically and internationally, as evidenced by the campaign issues of recent presidential campaigns, coupled with the removal of the psychological distance between the president and public, have contributed to this expectation" (p. 281). James David Barber, political science professor at Duke University, expressed in an interview with Iggers (1992), "There is a real malady going on...so many people in the country are angry and despairing and apathetic and so forth. And because so much of the information that comes to them is so complicated that they can't understand it, they go for simplicity. They go for morals" (p. 17A).

Media scholar Jay Rosen of New York University argues that "some aspects of character are very important but that the news media have focused entirely on the wrong aspects" (Iggers, 1992, October 25, p. 17A). According to Rosen, an important distinction exists between public and private character. "What candidates do in private is largely irrelevant. What really matters is their public conduct. The news media prefer to focus on private character because they have never developed a set of public values" (Iggers, 1992, October 25, p. 17A).

Competence. Image questions related to trustworthiness and competence often are identified as issues of importance in presidential campaign coverage (Jamieson & Campbell, 1992). Popkin (1991) defines "competence" as a "measure of ability to handle a job, an

assessment of how effective the candidate will be in office, of whether he or she can get things done" (p. 61). Popkin suggests that sometimes voters care less about the issue positions of candidates than they do about which candidates can deliver the most on these issues, and which candidates can do a better job of simply managing and running the government. In short, says Popkin, "[voters] care about competence" (p. 61).

According to Popkin, voters perceive competence as a relevant dimension of candidate evaluation for three reasons: "(1) the candiate's competence directly affects the probability of his or her being able to deliver benefits from the system once elected. (2) Much of what...the president does involves the general management of the country. Since the voter has only limited information, he or she may vote for a candidate who seems capable of managing the affairs of the country even if that candidate is not the 'closest' to the voter's specific issue preferences. (3) Finally, if the candidate is elected, he or she will have to solve many problems that no one can anticipate on election day. Competence in unfamiliar areas may be inferred from the perceived competence of the candidate in other, more familiar, areas" (p. 61).

Voters attempt to assess a candidate's competence not by seeking out detailed information about how he or she has managed government and delivered benefits; rather, voters use shortcuts. These shortcuts are based on data that are new and easy to process; voters assess competence as they watch and read about a candidate's past behavior as well as how candidates handle crowds, speeches, press coverages, and reporter squabbles (Popkin, 1992).

Image. According to Iggers (1992, October 25), "if character is something inside, then you can't always tell what's inside by looking at what's outside. What's outside is image, and images, like appearances, can be deceiving" (p. 17A). Bowes and Strentz (1978) define "image" as "a person's publicly perceived attributes" (p. 391).

Candidates work diligently at crafting and producing an image of themselves for presentation to voters during the campaign (Davis, 1992). Four articles featured during the

1992 presidential campaign provide example and evidence of this claim. Dionne and Balz (1992, April 19) reported how Governor Clinton intended to establish a more presidential image of himself in order to try to dispel concerns about his personality and character. Ifill (1992, June 28) reported that Clinton was seeking a forceful image as a leader in foreign affairs. Elliott (1992, July 4) covered a story concerning a bold advertisng firm which was chosen to build Clinton's image. Berke (1992, July 22) reported a story concerning how the Bush campaign planned advertisements to restore the President's image. Indeed, the voters' images of the candidates are acquired through the prism of the media; candidates know this process and thus concentrate on creating a desired image (Davis, 1992).

Carefully crafted images of candidates then are exposed to the media who, in turn, offer this information to the electorate. Like issues which develop from campaign events, image issues are easy to cover. Because of journalistic values, voters are better informed about the candidates' image than either their leadership skills or their political platform (Patterson, 1991).

Research Questions

Ideally, in a democracy, a presidential campaign should promote great national discussion of substantive issues faced by the country. "The candidates are supposed to lay out competing solutions to the nation's most pressing problems. The media are supposed to keep the politicians and the public focused on the issues. The public is supposed to read, listen, sift, weight, and award its mandate to the ticket that communicates the clearest and most convincing vision of a better future...[but] in reality, the discussion of issues that reaches the electorate is woefully short of being clear, coherent, relevant, elevating, or substantive" (Black, 1992, August 23).

In an effort to see and understand more clearly the trends and types of issue coverage offered to the American electorate during the 1992 presidential campaign by the press, this study examines the front page of five newspapers between August 1 and

November 3, 1992. The study was limited to the front page for the purpose of simplicity and because of the emphasis placed on front page readership. Generally, page location is a key predictor of readership; it is evident in many studies that news stories featured on the front page will receive more attention than other stories (McCombs, 1987).

As indicated in the review of literature, the results of previous research indicate that past coverage of presidential campaigns has tended to focus more on "character/ competence/image" issues than "platform/political" issues (e.g., Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981; Patterson, 1980; Arterton, 1978). In an effort to understand if the nature of coverage of presidential campaigns has changed, the following research question is posited:

(1) Will front page coverage of the 1992 presidential campaign focus more on "character/competence/image" issues or "platform/political" issues during the months of August 1 through November 3, 1992?

A review of prior research and literature indicates a lack of information concerning the nature of coverage immediately prior to a presidential election; for example, prior to an election, does a certain type of coverage emerge? To explore this topic, the following research question is posited:

(2) What, if any, trend of issue coverage will emerge during the month preceding the 1992 presidential election?

METHOD

Subjects

Texts served as the subjects for this research study, specifically, the following five newspapers: The New York Times, Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, Milwaukee Journal (Sunset Edition), and the Minneapolis Star Tribune. A nonrandom, convenience sample of the front page of each of the five newspapers was researched using the methodology of content analysis. The newspapers were selected for several reasons. First, they were

available at both the university and local municipal libraries. Second, the newspapers provided an excellent geographical cross-section of the United States, as they represented both the East and West Coasts, as well as the Midwest. Third, the newspapers represented major metropolitan cities. The newspapers were content-analyzed everyday, except for Sunday, between August 1 and November 3, 1992. The Sunday edition was not included in the study because this edition was not available for all of the newspapers. Analysis was limited to the front page for the purpose of simplicity and because of the emphasis placed on front page readership.

Procedures

The research study was designed and directed by the primary researchers; coding was performed by 24 students in an undergraduate communication research methods course at a midwestern university. The student coders, male and female, were surveyed anonymously before the presidential election in order to assess potential coder bias. Results indicated that eight students intended to vote for the Clinton/Gore ticket, seven students intended to vote for the Bush/Quayle ticket, two students intended to vote for the Perot/ Stockdale ticket, five students did not complete the survey, one student was undecided, and one international student was not eligible to vote.

Student coders were organized into five groups; each group was responsible for coding one of the five newspapers. Coders were trained with sample articles; in addition, a pilot study was conducted. Coders were not allowed to continue coding until they reached acceptable reliability scores of .80 or higher using Holsti's (1969) formula.

Researchers used a coding system to categorize the articles into one of three categories: (1) "character/competence/image" issues; (2) "platform/political" issues; and (3) "other." A standardized coding sheet was used to code each article which met the coding criteria. In order for an article to meet the criteria for the research study, the article had to concern the 1992 presidential campaign and had to be headlined with one of the words

from a "headline cue words" list. Headline cues included the following words: Bush, Quayle, Clinton, Gore, campaign, Republican, GOP, Democrat/Democratic, election, president, and/or voters. As independent candidate Ross Perot and his running-mate, James Stockdale, had withdrawn from the presidential race at the beginning of this study, they were not included in the coding procedure. The procedure also did not include the coding of photographs.

After locating a suitable article, coders were instructed to complete the coding form. Coders were required to document their name, indicate the newspaper coded, note the date, and document the entire headline ("entire headline" was defined as all of the words which appeared as the lead before the article).

Next, coders were instructed to read the entire article and determine its focus or essence; then, coders were instructed to code the article appropriately into one of the three categories. In cases where both "character/competence/image" issues and "platform/ political" issues were covered in an article, researchers were trained to assess the weight of the article. Articles which met the criteria for the headline cues and also pertained to the presidential campaign but did not clearly fit into one of the two main categories were coded as "other."

"Word cues" lists for "character/competence/image" issues as well as "platform/ political" issues were used only as guidelines. The "word cues" lists (see Table 1) were generated from group brainstorming as well as information derived from the official party platforms provided by both the Republican and Democrat Headquarters (Republican, 1992; Democrat, 1992). For example, "character/competence/image" cues included such words as avoidance of military service, credibility, dynamism, extramarital affairs, honesty, leadership ability, morality, physical attractiveness, and trust. "Platform/political" cues included such words as child support, civil rights, death penalty, defense, deficit, domestic policy, family values, health care, inflation, social security, taxes, unemployment, and welfare. Coders did not count words; the word cues were used only as guidelines to help

determine the essence of the article.

Insert Table 1 about here

Emphasis in the training procedure was placed on understanding how words were used to create meaning. In order to assess the reliability of the measurement technique, a second intercoder reliability check was conducted during the coding time period. The intercoder reliability check for all of the groups was conducted based on data collected from October 20, 21, and 22, 1992. Each of the five groups reached an acceptable reliability score of .80 or higher using Holsti's (1969) formula.

Data Treatment

Data from the coding sheets for each of the five newspapers were collected for the research period of August 1 through November 3, 1992 and then transformed into statistical data for descriptive data analysis. Researchers counted the frequency of occurence of the number of articles in each of the categories. The data were treated by calculating the mean and percentages of articles for each category.

RESULTS

Five Newspaper Summary Results

Of the 555 articles coded by the researchers, results of the study indicated that "character/competence/image" issues accounted for either a majority or a plurality[1] of front page coverage for four of the five newspapers during the coding period August 1 through November 3, 1992.[2] As indicated in Table 2, a summary analysis of the results of the five

newspaper samples revealed that both The New York Times (61%) and the Los Angeles Times (57%) featured a majority of front page coverage which focused on "character/competence/image issues." Results from the Minneapolis Star Tribune (38%) and the Milwaukee Journal (46%) samples indicated that a plurality of front page coverage addressed "character/competence/image" issues. Results from the Chicago Tribune sample revealed that coverage of "platform/political" issues (44%) was roughly equal to the coverage of "character/competence/image" issues (43%). Means were calculated based on the results from 555 articles coded from the five newspapers. The results revealed the following means: $\bar{x}$ = 51 for "character/competence/image" issues, $\bar{x}$ = 33 for "platform/political" issues, and $\bar{x}$ = 16 for "other."

Insert Table 2 about here

Analysis of the summarized data also revealed that all five newspapers featured more coverage of "character/competence/image" issues than "platform/political" issues during the final month and days before the election (October - November 3). As indicated in Table 3, the results revealed that a majority of front page coverage by The New York Times (78%), Los Angeles Times (61.6%), and the Milwaukee Journal (50%) focused on "character/competence/image" issues. The Chicago Tribune (48%) and the Minneapolis Star Tribune (38%) featured a plurality of coverage of "character/competence/image" issues.

Insert Table 3 about here

The New York Times

According to the data gathered from The New York Times between August 1 and November 3, 1992, the results indicated that a majority of the articles were classified as "character/competence/image" issues. A total of 148 articles met the criteria for coding as described in the Methods section. As indicated in Table 2, 61% of all of the articles coded were classified as "character/competence/image" issues, 27% of the articles were coded as "platform/political" issues, and 12% of the articles were classified as "other."

Table 3 features the results of the data gathered for each month (August, September, October-November 3, 1992) from The New York Times. According to the results, a majority of the articles were coded as "character/competence/image" issues during the months of August (57%) and October-November 3, 1992 (78%). A plurality of the articles were classified as "platform/political" issues during the month of September (41%).

Minneapolis Star Tribune

According to the data gathered from the Minneapolis Star Tribune between August 1 and November 3, 1992, the results indicated that a plurality of the articles were classified as "character/competence/image" issues. A total of 100 articles met the criteria for coding. As indicated in Table 2, 38% of all of the articles coded were classified as "character/competence/image" issues, 35% of the articles were classified as "platform/political" issues, and 27% of the articles were coded as "other."

Table 3 features the results of the data gathered for each month (August, September, October-November 3, 1992) from the Minneapolis Star Tribune. According to the results, a majority of the articles were coded as "platform/political" issues during the month of August (59%), whereas a plurality of the articles were classified as "platform/political" during the month of September (41%). During the coding period of October-November 3, 1992, a plurality (49%) of the articles were coded as "other."

Chicago Tribune

According to the data gathered from the Chicago Tribune between August 1 and November 3, 1992, the results indicated that a small plurality of the articles were classified as "platform/political" issues." A total of 79 articles met the criteria for coding. As indicated in Table 2, 44% of all of the articles coded were classified as "platform/political" issues, 43% of the articles were classified as "character/competence/image" issues, and 13% of the articles were classified as "other."

Table 3 features the results of the data gathered for each month (August, September, October-November 3, 1992) from the Chicago Tribune. According to the results, a plurality of the articles were coded as "platform/political" issues during the month of August (49%), whereas a majority of the articles were coded as "platform/political" during the month of September (60%). During the coding period of October-November 3, 1992, however, the results indicate that a plurality (48%) of the articles were coded as "character/competence/image" issues.

Milwaukee Journal

According to the data gathered from the Sunset Edition of the Milwaukee Journal between August 1 and November 3, 1992, the results revealed that a plurality of the articles were classified as "character/competence/image" issues. A total of 67 articles met the criteria for coding. As indicated in Table 2, 46% of all of the articles coded were classified as "character/competence/image" issue, 27% of the articles were coded as "platform/political" issues, and 27% of the articles were coded as "other." Table 3 features the results of the data gathered for each month (August, September, October-November 3, 1992) from the Milwaukee Journal. According to the results, a majority of the articles were coded as "character/competence/image" issues during the month of August (50%) as well as during the coding period of October-November 3, 1992 (50%). However, during the month of September, articles were coded equally into all three of the categories (33.3%

each).

Los Angeles Times

According to the data collected from the Los Angeles Times between August 1 and November 3, 1992, the results indicated that a majority of the articles were classified as "character/competence/image" issues. A total of 161 articles met the criteria for coding. As indicated in Table 2, 57% of all of the articles coded were classified as "character/competence/image" issues, 33% of the articles were coded as "platform/political" issues, and 10% of the articles were classified as "other."

Table 3 features the results of the data gathered for each month (August, September, October-November 3, 1992) from the Los Angeles Times. According to the results, a majority of the articles were coded as "character/competence/image" issues during the entire coding period: 57% of the articles were coded as "character/competence/image" issues during the month of August, 51% during the month of September, and 61.6% during October-November 3, 1992.

DISCUSSION

Two research questions were posited in this study: (1) Will front page coverage of the 1992 presidential campaign focus more on "character/competence/image" issues or "platform/political" issues during the months of August 1 through November 3, 1992? (2) What, if any, trend of issue coverage will emerge during the month preceding the 1992 presidential election? Each of these questions will be discussed below.

Research Question #1

Results of the study indicated that of the 555 articles coded by the researchers, "character/competence/image" issues acccounted for either a majority or a plurality of front

page coverage for four of the five newspapers during the coding period, August 1 through November 3, 1992. A summary analysis of the results of the five newspaper samples revealed that both The New York Times (61%) and the Los Angeles Times (57%) featured a majority of front page coverage which focused on "character/competence/image" issues. Results from the Minneapolis Star Tribune (38%) and the Milwaukee Journal (46%) samples indicated that a plurality of front page coverage addressed "character/competence/image" issues. These results support the findings of Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal (1981), and MacDougall (1980). Results from the Chicago Tribune sample revealed that coverage of platform/political" issues (44%) was roughly equal to the coverage of "character/ competence/image" issues (43%).

Research Question #2

Analysis of the summarized data revealed that all five newspapers featured more coverage of "character/competence/image" issues than "platform/political" issues during the final month and days before the election. The results indicated that a majority of front page coverage by The New York Times (78%), Los Angeles Times (61.6%), and the Milwaukee Journal (50%) focused on "character/competence/image" issues. The Chicago Tribune (48%) and the Minneapolis Star Tribune (38%) featured a plurality of coverage of "character/competence/image" issues.

The emphasis on "character/competence/image" issues during the final month and days before the election can likely be attributed to the campaign events that surfaced during that period. In early October, a USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll showed Governor Clinton to be 16 points ahead of President Bush (Benedetto, 1992, October 2). By the end of October, the same polling source showed Governor Clinton's lead to be only 7 points ahead of President Bush (Benedetto, 1992, October 26). This change in popularity can be attributed to Ross Perot re-entering the race (polls showed Perot's rise in popularity to be at Clinton's expense; President Bush's ratings remained generally steady during the month while

Governor Clinton's ratings declined).

President Bush, seeing the narrowing of the polls as an opportunity, increased his attacks on Governor Clinton. These attacks largely focused on Clinton's character, mainly his draft record and whether he could be trusted to be President. For example, at a campaign rally in Billings, Montana, Bush was quoted as saying about Clinton, "If they ever put this guy [Clinton] on Mount Rushmore, they have to have two faces for him...character does count...you're entitled to know whether he had a draft notice or whether he didn't...it's not right to play both sides of the issue to protect your own political neck" (Keen, 1992, October 26, p. 8A).

While Bush was gaining momentum in the final month of the campaign, the campaign was given a severe blow when President Bush was linked to the Iran-Contra scandal. Just four days before the election, former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger was indicted by a federal grand-jury in the Iran-Contra investigation. Notes the grand-jury had as evidence against Mr. Weinberger showed President Bush approved of the arms-for-hostages trade with Iran. With this news now in the headlines, the Minneapolis Star Tribune reported President Bush as calling the investigation "a big witch hunt" (1992, November 2, p. 11A). Bush then increased his character attacks on Governor Clinton. For example, at a campaign rally in Auburn Hills, Michigan, the Minneapolis Star Tribune reported that Bush called on Clinton "to level with the American people" about his draft record. About Clinton being fit to be president, Bush told the audience that "the bottom line is we simply cannot take the risk on Governor Clinton" (1992, November 2, pp. 1A, 11A).

As shown through the above events, "character/competence/image" issues became very prevalent in the final month and days before the election. Specifically, these events focused on (1) the re-entry of Ross Perot into the campaign, (2) the narrowing of Governor Clinton's and President Bush's ratings in the polls, and (3) President Bush's linkage to Iran-Contra. These events created a context in which issues of "character/competence/image" became the focus of the campaign.

Problems and Limitations

It is important to make clear the problems and limitations associated with this research study. Three factors related to problems and limitations are identified and will be discussed.

(1) Although the coders were trained, participated in a pilot study, and conducted two reliability checks during the research period, it is necessary to make clear the potential problems associated with interpretation in the coding procedure. Researchers were instructed to determine the focus or essence of each article and then code the article into the appropriate category. In addition to potential interpretation problems, it is possible that coder political orientation may have affected coding decisions.[3]

(2) The sample which served as the basis for this study was a non-random, convenience sample. Furthermore, the sample examined only the front page of five newspapers during the limited time period of August 1 through November 3, 1992.[4]

(3) As independent candidate Ross Perot and his running-mate, James Stockdale, had withdrawn from the presidential race at the beginning of this study, they were not included in the coding procedure.[5]

Suggestions for Future Research

Three suggestions are identified and will be discussed for researchers interested in conducting a content-analytic study on this topic in the future.

(1) A random sample size larger than three months could enhance the validity of the results. For example, one might begin the study when the candidates first announce their candidacy; coding then could continue through election day.

(2) Researchers should consider coding beyond the front page.

(3) Finally, researchers should consider designing a study which attempts to examine the relationship, if any, between coverage of issues and voter decisions.

Conclusions

According to the results of this study, it is clear that during the three month period before the election, the editors of four of the five newspapers which were examined placed more emphasis on the coverage of "character/competence/image" issues than on "platform/political" issues. These results support the past agenda-setting research studies focusing on political elections which reveal that newspapers have tended to print more studies about a candidate's character than how he or she stands on "platform/political" issues (MacDougall, 1980; Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981). These results also support other studies which have concluded that coverage of a candidate's own issue priorities were featured less frequently than coverage of other campaign issues (Sigelman & Bullock, 1991; Patterson, 1989; Patterson & Davis, 1985; Robinson & Sheehan, 1983; Patterson, 1980; Arterton, 1978).

Furthermore, the results of this study indicate that all five of the newspapers featured more coverage of "character/competence/image" issues than "platform/political" issues during the final month and days before the election. Because research and literature concerning patterns or trends of issue coverage is lacking, it is difficult to know whether or not these findings are unique to the 1992 presidential campaign. As Jamieson and Campbell (1992) state, "Image versus issues; character versus positions. Scholars have wasted a lot of time trying to distinguish between messages that relate to candidate image and messages that relate to candidates' stands on issues. The problem, of course, is that almost every message says something that can be interpreted as an issue and tries to enhance the candidate's credibility, hence image. It is more useful to recognize that stands on issues produce an image..." (p. 285). Still, as this study attempted to make clear, a majority of the messages featured on the front page of these newspapers did not concern "stands on issues." The public may not have received such information which thus may have potentially limited their understanding of the total "image."

Clearly, the "gatekeeper" agenda-setting role of the press may affect voters' ability

to be informed about "platform/political" issue positions of candidates. Perhaps the most important point to consider is the potential impact of these findings on the political process in the United States. As Parenti (1993) makes clear, "by focusing on 'human interest' trivia, or contest rather than content, the press makes it difficult for the public to give intelligent expression to political life and to mobilize around issues" (p. 17). Clearly, voters perceive competence and character issues as a relevant dimension of candidate evaluation for numerous reasons. However, it is possible that too much attention to such coverage is problematic. Although the results of one study released by Columbia University's Freedom Forum Media Studies Center indicated that media coverage of the 1992 presidential campaign was an improvement over its coverage of the 1988 campaign (Gersh, 1993), a second study conducted by the same center concluded that Americans felt that coverage of character issues had received *too* much attention in the 1992 campaign (Case, 1992).

Scholars have suggested that journalists gravitate to issues developed from campaign incidents rather than platform/political issues because they more neatly fit news values (Davis, 1992; Patterson, 1991). According to other scholars (Lee & Solomon, 1990), "TV networks and print media are under tremendous pressure to shape their product in a way that best accomodates the needs of their advertisers" (p. 60). If, in fact, either of these reasons are significantly linked to the agenda-setting motives of journalists, it is time for the American public to more actively seek out information which will provide more intelligent expression to political life. Furthermore, it is time for journalists to consider more seriously their influence and power in molding opinion visibility as well as their role in promoting a democratic discussion of issues of substance.

In conclusion, this study provided a scholarly analysis of issue coverage by the print media in the 1992 presidential campaign. By providing an understanding of the types of issues which comprised the agenda set by the media, and by presenting evidence which suggests a strong historical trend of such issue coverage, researchers can continue to explore the links between issue coverage, the process of opinion formation, and democratic

decision-making in society. In effect, researchers should continue to expand the boundaries of agenda-setting, a philosophical model conceptualized seventy-one years ago (Lippman, 1972) with obvious heuristic value.

Notes

[1]"Plurality" is defined and applied in this study as frequency counts which total less than a majority but exceed all other category frequency counts.

[2]Data are missing from the following newspapers: Chicago Tribune, August 6, 1992; Milwaukee Journal, September 16 and 17, 1992; and the Los Angeles Times, August 14, September 24 and 26, October 9 and 13, 1992.

[3]An anonymous survey was conducted before the election to assess the political orientation and voting intentions of the coders. As the results of the survey indicated a fair and even distribution of political orientations and voting intentions, it is suggested that these factors may not have affected the results of the study in a negative manner.

[4]See Note 2.

[5]At the beginning of the research study, Ross Perot, the independent candidate, had withdrawn from the 1992 presidential race; thus, Mr. Perot was not included in the study. However, in early October 1992, Mr. Perot re-entered the race. As researchers had already coded two months of data, it was impossible to include Mr. Perot in the study. It is conceivable that the exclusion of Mr. Perot from the study could have affected the results.

Tables

Table 1

Word Cues List for Character/Competence/Images Issues and Platform/Political Issues

Character/Competence/Image Issues		
age	drug/alcohol use	marital relationship
avoidance of military service	dynamism	morality
bad checks	education	pandering
competence	endorsements	patriotism
conflict of interest	extramarital affairs	physical attractiveness
confrontational	family background/issues	political experience
conservative political being	former employment	sexual harassment (if accused of)
consistency	honesty	slick
credibility	humor	temper (anger)
donations	intelligence	tax evasion
draft dodging	leadership ability	trust
	liberal political being	

Platform/Political Issues		
anti-crime	employment	national security
abortion	empower people not government	pro-choice
AIDS (HIV)	environment	pro-life
agriculture	family and medical	racial relations
America 2000		sexual harassment

balanced budget
Brady Bill
capital gains
capital finance laws
child support
civil rights
congressional payraise
cut spending
death penalty
defense
deficit
disaster assistance/relief
domestic policy
drugs
economy (national/ international)
education
leave act
family values (single parenthood)
foreign policy/affairs
gay/lesbian
GI Bill for children
head start funding
health care
homeless
housing
inflation
interest rate
labor
legal system
line-item veto
military
senior citizens
social security
taxes
tax incentives for business
term limitations
trade
unemployment
United Nations
urban enterprise zones
violence against women act
war: Iraq (Saddam Hussein)
war: Yugoslavia
welfare

Table 2

Number and Percentage Scores for Five Newspaper Issue Coverage

(August 1 - November 3, 1992)

Newspaper	NYT	MST	CT	MJ	LAT
Character/Competence/Image	90 (61)	38 (38)	34 (43)	31 (46)	92 (57)
Platform/Political	40 (27)	35 (35)	35 (44)	18 (27)	53 (33)
Other	18 (12)	27 (27)	10 (13)	18 (27)	16 (10)
Total	148 (100)	100 (100)	79 (100)	67 (100)	161(100)

Note. Scores in parentheses are the percentage scores.

Table 3

Number and Percentage Scores for Five Newspaper Issue Coverage Coded by Month (August 1- November 3, 1992)

Newspaper	NYT	MST	CT	MJ	LAT
Character/Competence/Image					
Aug.	24 (57)	11 (38)	18 (46)	14 (50)	31 (57)
Sept.	14 (36)	12 (37)	4 (27)	5 (33.3)	24 (51)
Oct. - Nov. 3	52 (78)	15 (38)	12 (48)	12 (50)	37 (61.6)
Platform/Political					
Aug.	15 (36)	17 (59)	19 (49)	10 (36)	22 (41)
Sept.	16 (41)	13 (41)	9 (60)	5 (33.3)	18 (38)
Oct. - Nov. 3	9 (13)	5 (13)	7 (28)	3 (12.5)	13 (21.6)
Other					
Aug.	3 (7)	1 (3)	2 (5)	4 (14)	1 (2)
Sept.	9 (23)	7 (22)	2 (13)	5 (33.3)	5 (11)
Oct. - Nov. 3	6 (9)	19 (49)	6 (24)	9 (37.5)	10 (16.6)
Total					
Aug.	42 (100)	29 (100)	39 (100)	28 (100)	54 (100)
Sept.	39 (100)	32 (100)	15 (100)	15 (99.9)	47 (100)
Oct. - Nov. 3	67 (100)	39 (100)	25 (100)	24 (100)	60 (99.8)

Note. Scores in parentheses are the percentage scores.

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